

**INDIAN-HATING AND POPULAR CULTURE:
THE ICONOGRAPHY OF JOHN WAYNE IN *THE SEARCHERS***

by
Seth Bovey

A few bars of an Indian war chant, menacing and anxiety-ridden, begins the soundtrack of *The Searchers* (1956). Then, as the title appears on the screen, the war chant segues into a ballad by Stan Jones. The credits come and go against an adobe wall, and a male chorus sings a lilting, bittersweet air:

"What makes a man to wander?
What makes a man to roam?
What makes a man leave bed and board
And turn his back on home?
Ride away, ride away, ride away...."

John Ford's film tries to answer these questions by creating an Indian-hating hero on a quest for vengeance. Yet the resulting actions leave the viewer with even more questions. If John Wayne is the hero of the film, why does he play such a hard-bitten, ferocious man? Since he spends most of the story trying to kill his niece for being contaminated by life with the Comanches, why does Wayne's character suddenly decide to save her in the end?

Questions like these have bothered reviewers and critics of the film as well, with some arguing that its effects are not in harmony with its intent.¹ In part, this disharmony is genetic, for *The Searchers* inherited its hero from the 1954 novel by Alan LeMay, a book that continues the tradition of the Indian-Hater narrative. This line of stories began during the American Revolution, with the first full-blown Indian Hater appearing in James McHenry's *The Spectre in the Forest* (1823). The figure reached its apotheosis in Robert Montgomery Bird's *Nick of the Woods* (1837), in which Nathan Slaughter is a vengeance-driven, Indian-mutilating Quaker. Portrayed as both frontier hero and bloodthirsty maniac, Nathan embodies the ambivalence that shows up in every Indian-Hater story. John Wayne's Ethan

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Edwards fits the same pattern; he is both hero and antihero.

Another source of disharmony in the film is Ford's focus on John Wayne as the protagonist. LeMay's novel is actually a coming-of-age story that features Martin Pauley's search for home and family, with the Indian-hating Amos serving only as his guide and tutor. Ford's film shifts its emphasis to the divided, haunted, and brutal character of Ethan/Wayne, thereby causing cognitive dissonance in the viewer. To overcome this disunity, Ford turns Ethan into an Outsider whose anomie exposes his culture's own hypocritical practices and beliefs. Moreover, Ford uses a number of repetitive images as structural devices to give the film coherence and to unify its effects.

Judging by the reviews that appeared in the summer of 1956, Ford's unifying devices were a little too subtle. Although moviegoers were attracted to the film's settings, rousing actions, and folksy pictures of frontier life, they were repulsed by its monomaniacal and brutal hero. For instance, the reviewer for *Look* notes that Wayne is "a grim and dusty rider" who is alone and sad,² while the reviewer for *Time* refers to the "lean, leathery, disenchanting John Wayne."³ *Commonweal* points out that Wayne is "such an unpleasant, sour, Indian-hating character" and asks, "What makes John so disdainful of most people and so full of hate towards Indians in particular?"⁴

Reviewers were also troubled by the film's Indian-hating. Robert Hatch, writing for *The Nation*, calls Wayne's character "a dangerous lunatic" and the film "a picnic for sadists," arguing that the movie is "long on brutality and short on logic or responsible behavior." Furthermore, he exposes the film's lack of unity by writing, "All this could be psychologically tenable, and even interesting, but Wayne's behavior is presented as the heroic stuff out of which the West was made."⁵ In short, Hatch notices what the reviewer for *America* argues in a more general way: "[*The Searchers*] is curiously deficient however in the unity and cumulative power implicit in the material."⁶

Executive producer C.V. Whitney, knowing that his material would put burrs under some people's seats, said in a *Newsweek* interview that "It was the first property I could get which fulfilled my ideals—namely, to show the early West's reality, its grimness, humor, and warmth. It's a rough story, but so were the times when it happened."⁷ This appeal to realism is plausible, for the basic story was common in frontier Texas. The most notable example took place in May of 1836, when a band of Comanches attacked Parker Fort on the Navasota River. After slaughtering most of the Parker family, the warriors abducted nine-year-old Cynthia Ann and her brother John. Cynthia Ann grew up among the Comanches, married a warrior, and gave birth to the infamous Quanah Parker before some overzealous Texans "rescued" her in 1860. Conceivably, the experiences of Miss Parker could

have served as a basis for the plot of *The Searchers*.

However, the film refers to Texas history only in the most superficial way; its true inspiration is the line of narratives that began during the American Revolution and gave rise to the figure of the Indian Hater, of which Ethan/Wayne is a perfect example. Initially, Indian fighters like Lewis Wetzel and Samuel Brady became legendary for their bloody-minded adventures, and writers of fiction turned to this folklore for material to exploit. As developed in such works as Charles Brockden Brown's *Edgar Huntly* (1799), McHenry's *The Spectre in the Forest* (1823), and Bird's *Nick of the Woods* (1837), the fictional Indian Hater is a frontiersman who has been so traumatized by an Indian atrocity that he takes an oath of vengeance and becomes an obsessive killer of Indians.⁸

The psychological mechanisms responsible for this transformation are examined by Herman Melville in the Indian-hating section of *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade* (1857). Retelling James Hall's account of Col. John Moredock, a famous Indian Hater, Melville explains how the backwoodsman reacts to "Indian lying, Indian theft, Indian double-dealing, Indian fraud and perfidy, Indian want of conscience, Indian blood-thirstiness, [and] Indian diabolism...."⁹ Lest one think that Melville advocates Indian-hating, one needs to keep in mind that Melville's purpose in developing "The Metaphysics of Indian-hating" is to satirize the ideas that human nature is good and the universe benevolent. By depicting Indians as the minions of Satan and the Indian Hater as a religious enthusiast, Melville argues that one must be a devoted hater of evil to fight it. He thereby ridicules the weak-kneed, sentimental faith of his time as a brand of Christianity that cannot contend with evil.

Earlier writers of fiction such as James Hall and Robert Montgomery Bird use the Indian Hater in a less satirical way to express conflicting thoughts about the settlement of the frontier. Working with the awareness that the native people of America were the victims of Euro-American encroachment as well as perpetrators of violence, they portray their Indian Haters as both murderous fiends and frontier heroes. The resulting figure is a divided, conflicted, fragmented man of sorrows who may be seen as a signifier of the ambivalence that Euro-Americans feel about their treatment of Native Americans.¹⁰

This ambivalence shows up in every Indian-Hater narrative from *Edgar Huntly* to the present, giving credence to critic Forrest G. Robinson's argument that popular Western romances are contradictory and self-subversive because they attempt to "have things both ways."¹¹ That is, they reveal cultural flaws while denying any sort of wrongdoing within the dominant culture. As an illustration, Robinson demonstrates that Cooper's *Last of the Mohicans* "manages to express guilt [over the treatment of Indians] and to repress it at the same time; its readers may at one sitting feel the sting of conscience and the supportive hand of destiny in

their response to the same, central issue."¹² This observation might well be applied to the Indian-Hater narrative, every one of which betrays the same self-subversion and contradictions found in Cooper's Leatherstocking tales.

Alan LeMay's novel, *The Searchers*, has this trait; it contains the traditional plot elements and characters of the nineteenth-century narrative, and its Indian Hater, Amos Edwards, is as vicious and monomaniacal as Bird's Nathan Slaughter. LeMay begins his novel with the following epigraph:

These people had a kind of courage that may be the finest fruit of man: the courage of those who simply keep on, and on, doing the next thing, far beyond all reasonable endurance, seldom thinking of themselves as martyred, and never thinking of themselves as brave.¹³

By implication, LeMay praises his Indian Hater as an enduring, ever-suffering pioneer before condemning his Indian-hating in the novel itself.

LeMay's wink of approval shows up as a vigorous nod of approval in the film of *The Searchers*, which inherits Amos and turns him into Ethan (John Wayne). Not only does the film inherit the disunity that goes along with Indian Haters, it compounds the problem by making Ethan/Wayne into the hero of the movie. The opening scene, which shows Ethan/Wayne riding out of the barren expanse of Monument Valley to return to his brother's homestead, is a traditional establishing shot that presents the Western hero as a lone, dark rider emerging from the wasteland. In contrast, LeMay's coming-of-age narrative features young Martin Pauley as the hero, with the Indian Hater serving as the hero's tutor and guide. Since the reader sees Amos through the eyes of Martin, the novel offers a more objective, third-person vantage point from which to view Indian-hating. Thus, the reader does not identify with the Indian Hater but judges him. The film's shift in point of view away from Marty (Jeffrey Hunter) to Ethan/Wayne forces the viewer to see events from Ethan's perspective and to identify with Indian-hating. Cognitive dissonance results.

Having John Wayne play Ethan only adds to the discord in the film. By 1956, Wayne had played in dozens of Westerns such as *Stagecoach* (1939), *Tall in the Saddle* (1944), and *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon* (1949), developing a likable screen persona that colored (or dominated) every role he played. In *The Searchers*, Wayne plays Ethan as a gruff, abrasive man who is an unregenerate Johnny Reb and robber of Union gold.¹⁴ Besides brutalizing Indians, Ethan/Wayne browbeats Marty and disrupts the social gatherings in his community. Yet the viewer cannot forget that Ethan is "John Wayne, American," and the images of a well-admired

personality being animated by a dark and vicious spirit confound the viewer even further, raising the specter of ambivalence concerning Wayne's persona. Using the Duke as an icon of pioneering fortitude while portraying Ethan as a mad-dog killer puts the film's intent at odds with its effects.

In part, Frank S. Nugent's script for *The Searchers* alleviates this disharmony by having Ethan expose the contradictions and hypocrisy that exist in the other characters. As numerous critics have observed, Ethan's position as a cynical outsider enables him to reveal the moral shortcomings of his fellow pioneers. For example, film critic Graham Fuller states that Ethan expresses "utter contempt for the customs that bind and sustain society in the way that he cuts short the funeral of his murdered brother and sister-in-law—'Put an Amen to it,'"¹⁵ In addition, after Ethan stomps away from the services and mounts up, a Bible-toting Mrs. Jorgensen tells him, "Don't let the boys waste their lives in vengeance. Promise me, Ethan!" Ethan/Wayne looks right through her and barks out orders to Marty and Brad, showing his disdain for proper social forms. Yet it would be a mistake to call Ethan an "anarchic hero," as Fuller does, for Ethan maintains fidelity to several institutions—namely, his family and the Confederate States of America, to which he has sworn an oath of allegiance. Clearly, Ethan does respect some social practices and forms.

According to British existentialist writer Colin Wilson's definition of the type, Ethan may more accurately be called an Outsider. Ethan, like Wilson's Outsider, "is a man who has awakened to chaos;" for him, "the world is not rational, not orderly."¹⁶ His recognition of the world's brutal senselessness is all too clear during the scene in which he and Marty look over the white captives taken during the U. S. Army's attack on the Comanche band. Ethan watches as a wide-eyed girl with a crazed grin on her face snatches a rag doll out of Marty's hands and dementedly eeps to it, rocking back and forth. The close-up of Wayne's face reveals an unstable blend of terror and loathing. Unlike the other men in the room, Ethan cannot turn away and shrug off the sight; he must see what it signifies. As Wilson points out, he has the distressing sense "*that truth must be told at all costs*, otherwise there can be no hope for an ultimate restoration of order."¹⁷ This drive for order is what compels Ethan to run into the burning homestead to find the mutilated body of Martha or to bury the ravaged body of Lucy in his own coat. Such traumas almost turn Ethan into a raving madman, but he must incorporate them into his consciousness to find what is true.

Ethan is also an Outsider in the sense that he sees the hypocrisies of his own society. According to Wilson,

all men and women have these dangerous, unnamable impulses.

yet they keep up a pretense, to themselves and others; their respectability, their philosophy, their religion, are all attempts to gloss over, to make look civilized and rational something that is savage, unorganized, irrational.¹⁶

The Outsider, however, is able to see these oversights in his fellow human beings and compensate for them in his own consciousness. Ethan's efforts in this arena are most clearly defined in his relationship with the Reverend Samuel Clayton, a glib, good-natured man who also serves as captain of the Texas Rangers. Changing roles as easily as he slips on a preacher's collar or pins on a lawman's badge, Reverend Clayton embodies the contradictory, dualistic ways of the pioneer. Both killer and man of God, Clayton shouts "Hallelujah!" as he shoots Comanche warriors and watches them fall.

Ethan recognizes the hypocrisy in Clayton and uses sarcasm to undercut Clayton's image. For instance, when Ethan shoots out the eyes of a dead Comanche brave and the captain demands, "Now, what good did that do you?", Ethan says, "By what you preach, none." Then he explains his reasoning in terms of Comanche beliefs, revealing his own superior knowledge of Comanche ways and the captain's cultural limitations. In other scenes, when the Reverend asks a prying question, Ethan cannily asks whether he is speaking as a captain or a reverend. At every turn, Ethan's sneering remarks and fake servility express his contempt for Clayton's authority. After the search party tries to sneak up on the Comanches in the dark and finds only the ashes of their campfires, Ethan turns to Clayton and says in Wayne's oafishly sarcastic voice, "Any more orders, Captain?"

Ethan/Wayne is more than a macho scout who asserts his superiority over the bungling captain. He understands that "the captain-reverend ... can tolerate the essential paradoxes of racial violence.... and so can society as a whole,"¹⁷ while he himself cannot. Unlike every other man in the film, Ethan is an unabashed Indian Hater whose self-knowledge and honesty make him pure. He is the only man who does not pose behind a veneer of moral righteousness while behaving like a savage.

Yet the film still struggles with its ambivalence toward the Ethan/Wayne character, who is more savage than the other Texans. During the skirmish with the Comanches on the river, Ethan tries to take a potshot at one of the retreating warriors, but Rev. Clayton knocks his rifle barrel down and orders Ethan to give the Indians a chance to help their wounded. The enraged Ethan/Wayne throws down his hat and shouts, "Well, that just tears it. From now on, stay out of my way." Then we see his face, swollen with blood and distorted with hatred. His ugliness, as contrasted with Clayton's angry but controlled expression, argues that Ethan is excessively cruel while the reverend-captain has a sense of decency and

fair play.

Once again, the film acknowledges Ethan's honesty and purity but shies away from justifying his Indian-hating. In fact, it would be a mistake to see the massacre of the Edwards family as the event that transforms Ethan into an Indian Hater and justifies his desire for revenge. On the contrary, Ethan's treatment of Marty establishes early on that Ethan already hates Indians by the time he appears on screen. When Marty shows up for dinner in the first scene, Ethan/Wayne looks at him with distaste and says, "A fella could mistake you for a half-breed." After the conversation reveals that Marty is part Cherokee, someone at the dinner table reminds Ethan that he was the one who found the boy and saved him after his family had been massacred by the Comanches. Ethan replies, "Just happened to be me--no need to make more of it." Later, out on the trail, Marty makes an observation about Indian sign and Ethan contemptuously says, "What would a quarter-breed Cherokee know about the Comanche?"

Moreover, Ethan disavows any ties of kinship to Marty and continually reminds him that he is a foundling with no claim on the Edwards' property. When Marty calls him "Uncle Ethan," the Indian Hater grouses: "Don't call me 'Uncle'--name's Ethan." The film clearly shows that Ethan's "character has made the events of his life reflect the outsider position he occupies";²⁰ that is, Ethan's Indian-hating is a natural expression of his character, not solely a reaction to the massacre.

Given the mixed images of Ethan/Wayne that bombard the viewer, it is no wonder that most critics find his transformation at the end of the film somewhat confusing. After spending most of the film trying to kill Debbie, the niece who has been ruined by sleeping with a "Comanche buck," Ethan suddenly becomes a more familiar John Wayne and sweeps the girl off her feet to carry her home to her ranch. In terms of the plot, this climax hardly makes sense, but Ford prepares the viewer for this turn of events by using a series of visual devices. Specifically, he marks off each stage in the plot with a graphic framing device. The most oft-discussed one appears in the opening shot of the film. As the camera looks out from the dark interior of the Edwards' home through the lighted doorway, Martha walks outside to watch the lone figure of Ethan emerge from the barren landscape. Most critics see the dark cavity as a womb-image and argue that Ethan is returning to a place of solace and love. As film critic Tag Gallagher puts it, "Within the doorway dwells our innerness, heart and womb, our vulnerability, even our unconscious."²¹ Presumably, Ethan has decided to surrender himself to hearth and home after years of wandering strife.

The film contains at least thirteen of these framed shots, and each one signals a major turn of events. For example, the search party is framed by a gigantic rock wall just before discovering the bull killed by the marauding Comanches:

Ethan is framed by the doorway after he discovers Martha's mutilated body; the searchers are framed by rock walls shortly before Ethan tells Brad and Marty about Lucy's ravaged body; and Ethan and Marty are framed by the doorway of Scar's teepee just before they find Debbie.

Perhaps the most compelling frame appears after Scar shoots an arrow into Ethan's shoulder and the searchers flee to a nearby cave. Repeating the womb motif, Ford aims the camera out of the dark cavern at the lighted world outside as the men come in, with the cave's mouth framing the action. Ethan and Marty fight off the Comanches from the refuge of the cave. Then Marty removes the arrow from Ethan and nurses him, who comes to accept the youth. In a moving scene outside the cave's opening, Ethan gives Marty a new will that makes the young man his heir and kin. Film critic J. A. Place explains this change of heart by saying that the removal of the arrow is "a metaphor for removing the poison that has been filling Ethan with consuming hatred."²² More to the point, the womb imagery suggests that Ethan has been reborn; after his emergence from the mouth of the cave, he is a new man, one who has regained a measure of innocence as well as acceptance and trust.

Being aware of the poetic connotations of Ford's womb imagery is essential to understanding the climax of the film. The next framed shot appears after the battle with Sear's band. During the attack, Ethan finds Scar's body, who has been shot by Marty, and he scalps it. Then he sees Debbie and gives chase, scuffling with Marty. As Ethan catches up with Debbie, Ford presents another womb-image; the viewer watches from the dark interior of a cave as the girl runs into its mouth to escape. Again, the opening of the cave frames the action. Ethan rides up in a swirl of dust, dismounts, and runs Debbie down. She makes a kittenish attempt to fight back as Ethan throws her up into the air, just as he did when she was a child. As her expression changes from fear to surprise, the viewer realizes that something unexpected is going on, and Ethan/Wayne says, "Let's go home, Debbie." Obviously, Ethan has been reborn once again in the earth-womb, and he emerges from the cavern as a three-transformed man.

Ethan is not the only character who has undergone a rebirth. As Ethan/Wayne carries Debbie up to the Jorgensen's place and delivers her into the arms of Mrs. Jorgensen, the viewer understands that Debbie too has been reborn, delivered from her barbaric life with Scar and the Comanches to her proper place among her own people. In essence, Debbie's emergence from the cave purifies her of the taint of miscegenation, and Ethan/Wayne's act of delivering her demonstrates his tacit approval of her. Her ex-neighbors and friends could hardly refuse her after Ethan's show of approval, so they accept her with open arms, and the manner of everyone in the final scene promises that their lives will change for the better.

The final framed shot offers another unexpected (but appropriate) turn of events. After all of the others enter the dark interior of the Jorgensen's home, signifying their return to a place of domestic love and security, Ethan stands in the frame of the doorway and refuses to come in out of the dry, dusty, harshly lit world outside. Clearly enough, Ethan has decided not to "come in" and become domesticated; he has opted for his lonely and nomadic way of life once again. The viewer is now faced with another unexpected turn of events. In light of Ethan's rebirth in the previous scene, one might expect him finally to find the peace of mind that he was obviously looking for in the opening scene of the film by surrendering himself to hearth and home, but no; he now contradicts what the film has promised several times, and the film's unity is violated.

Rather than becoming a flaw, however, this final shot satisfies the emotions of the viewer by alluding to what has become a cliché in the mythology of the Western hero. In the denouement of the standard Western story, the hero "rides off into the sunset" instead of settling down in the town that he has redeemed from evil. To do otherwise, to marry the heroine and settle down to domestic life, would be a sort of death for the hero; his "giving up" of his wild, unrestrained life outside for a cultivated life inside would represent his taming or emasculation. Since the Western film is a generally optimistic genre, and the film-maker wants to leave the viewer with the promise of continued adventures, he has the hero ride away into the undetermined future.

Ford's ending for *The Searchers* trades on this very mythology by having Ethan/Wayne turn away from domestic life. The soundtrack begins to play Stan Jones's ballad again as Ethan delivers Debbie to Mrs. Jorgensen. As Ethan watches the others go inside, we hear: "A man will search his heart and soul / Go searchin' way out there ... / His peace of mind he knows he'll find / But where, O Lord, where?" We understand now that Ethan/Wayne will have to find his peace of mind elsewhere. Then, as Ethan/Wayne turns away from the open door and walks off into the bright, hazy distance, we hear the words: "Ride away, ride away, ride away...." Finally, the image of Ethan/Wayne, growing smaller, disappears with a horizontal wipe to black, and we are left with the promise that Ethan/Wayne will continue, that he has been redeemed of his Indian-hating, that his life will make sense after all. And so Ford's film has it both ways, managing to exploit Indian-hating for its dramatic power while condemning it for its immorality.

NOTES

1. For a representative example, see the discussion in Anderson.

2. Rev. of *The Searchers*, dir. John Ford, *Look*, 12 June 1956, 90.
3. Rev. of *The Searchers*, dir. John Ford, *Time*, 25 June 1956, 58.
4. Rev. of *The Searchers*, dir. John Ford, *Commonweal*, 15 June 1956, 274.
5. Hatch, Robert, Rev. of *The Searchers*, dir. John Ford, *The Nation*, 23 June 1956, 536.
6. Rev. of *The Searchers*, dir. John Ford, *America*, 9 June 1956, 272.
7. Rev. of *The Searchers*, dir. John Ford, *Newsweek*, 21 May 1956, 117.
8. For a broader definition of Indian-hating that places the phenomenon in the context of American culture, see the discussions in Drinnon and Sandos. In general, these critics define "Indian-hating" as any sort of ethnocentric depiction of Native Americans, no matter how misguided or well-intentioned that depiction may be. This definition may reflect a true state of affairs, but such a broad-gauge approach makes the term "Indian-hating" almost meaningless. By classifying nearly every act of ethnocentrism involving Native Americans as a form of hatred, this definition violates the accepted meaning of the word "hate" and reduces our ability to articulate ideas about American culture. I prefer the more traditional and literary meaning of the term "Indian-hating," using it to refer to the state of mind of a frontiersman who obsessively kills and mutilates Indians.
9. Melville, Herman, *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade* (New York: Norton, 1971), 126.
10. For a full account of the Indian Hater as a character type in American literature, see Bovey.
11. Robinson, Forrest G., *Having It Both Ways: Self-Subversion in Western Popular Classics* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1993), 3.
12. *Ibid.*, 19.
13. LeMay, Alan, *The Searchers* (New York: Berkeley, 1992), epigraph.
14. Of course, John Wayne plays the same sort of antihero in Howard Hawks's *Red River* (1948), but the overwhelming majority of Wayne's characterizations are more

appealing Western heroes.

15. Fuller, Graham, "The Searchers," in *They Went That-A-Way*, ed. Ann Lloyd (London: Orbis Publishing, 1982), 70-71.
16. Wilson, Colin, *The Outsider* (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin Co., 1956), 15.
17. *Ibid.*, 15.
18. *Ibid.*, 13.
19. Gallagher, Tag, *John Ford: The Man and His Films* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 333.
20. Place, J. A., *The Western Films of John Ford* (Secaucus, New Jersey: The Citadel Press, 1973), 163.
21. Gallagher, 334.
22. Place, 169.

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